

# Versatile Hunting Dog Federation: A Framework for Testing

*by Joe Schmutz*

**Preamble.** Animals, including dogs, have been selectively bred to great advantage for thousands of years. Since then, some important conditions have changed, enabling potentially greater success on the one hand and requiring more care on the other. The old approach of breeding the best to the best still applies but with modifications. What has changed?

- Roughly a Century ago, Gregor Mendel's seminal work explaining patterns of inheritance among single genes was discovered.
- Where previously, inheritance was viewed as a blending as in mixing of blood - hence blood-lines – now it was recognized that some genes stay unchanged. Even when traits disappear in a generation, they can re-appear unaltered.
- Dog breeds have been continually 'refined' through 'pure-breeding.' For example, of the 400 or so dog breeds world-wide most originated in Europe over a mere 500 years. At the time of Columbus, Europe counted 14 breeds or 'types' (North America had 19 types).
- The substantial narrowing of the gene pools from broader types to narrow breeds, brought with it a more specialized/predictable working type but also loss of genetic diversity and loss of vigor/health. Survey data from Europe indicate that the disease incidence among a sample of today's cross-breds was 2.13 diseases per dog compared to a rate of 2.35-3.11 among six breeds of pure-breds.
- In addition to Mendel's single gene inheritance, a host of other factors can influence traits in dogs or other animals, including multi-gene interactions, 'environmental' or non-genetic effects, and teratogens or mild poisons causing developmental abnormalities. The notion of nature vs. nurture, especially the vs. part, is vastly outdated.

These considerations are important for an organization aiming to assist breeders in selective breeding and breed maintenance or adaptation.

**The Business of Testing.** Testing can serve different goals. Therefore, methodology and goal should align in order to be effective. The goal of the VHDF is to promote game conservation and recreation through hunting with trained dogs. In addition, most hunting dogs also serve a major role as family companion in and outside of the hunting season. The role of dogs in our culture is huge, even leading to documented improvements in human health with as compared to without dogs in the home. This dual role provided by our hunting dogs should be recognized, for example, by focusing on healthy temperament.

If testing is intended to help breeders 'improve' quality, then that which is being tested needs to be heritable. This places an onus on a testing organization to inform and train its judges accordingly. Also, some features of a dog's performance are more heritable than others. For example the concentration, motivation or desire a dog displays to hunt and find game, is clearly influenced by exposure but beyond a certain point no further gain can be achieved with exposure and genetics takes over. Conversely, whether a dog patiently waits through the fall and obediently

delivers to hand is influenced by genetics as in trainable temperament to a degree but mostly by training. Thus, the very facet which a judge looks for and evaluates must be carefully considered. Also this facet needs to be explicit so that a team of judges can come to the same conclusion and to a conclusion that matters to a breeder and ultimately to dogs in our lives. Judging the versatile hunting dog means interpreting dog behavior because in every task executed by a dog, different heritable components are at work. Judging can be a very humbling enterprise.

A dog's performance can be clearly influenced by chance, by the tiny details of the day or task; students of complexity theory call this 'sensitivity to initial conditions.' Where possible, the element of mere chance should be removed, as a handler and dog have spent countless hours and have made other investments and sacrifices to prepare for a test. They should be rewarded for their genuine achievements, not undervalued due to chance.

The element of chance is likely most influential in the beginning of a sequence, but can happen anywhere actually. Thus, a dog-handler team should be given satisfactory opportunity to retry within reason as necessary. This also makes the task of a judge easier in the sense that a dog is given enough rope to 'either hang itself or shine.'

**Definition of Versatile Hunting dog.** Versatile according to Webster's means capable of many tasks. Ed Bailey clarified the original *Jagdgebrauchshund* definition, elaborating four cornerstones of versatility. These are for a dog to:

- Be in control of its temperament;
- Display a balance between dependence and independence;
- Be able to shift gears when appropriate as opposed to one speed all the time; and finally
- Possess an abundance of cooperation.

These overlapping traits identify what a versatile dog is, not simply what it can do.